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CAROLE STONE

Carole Stone Interviews Ronald H. Bayes

Carole Stone conducted the following interview for Florida Public Radio at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, Florida, where Ronald H. Bayes was a Master Artist and she was his associate. The interview was made February 26, 1987.

C.S.: I want to start out, Ronb, by asking you how your background, your origins, growing up in Oregon, has influenced your work.

R.B.: I suspect that being raised as an only child on a fairly remote farm and in radio days, the imagination and the ear maybe worked overtime compared to the person in more average circumstances, or less isolated circumstances. My friend Dick Hugo, the late, great poet who was from Montana used to refer to this as the "hick sensibility," and I think that's a big asset in many ways...

C.S. And so you've carried that over in North Carolina quite gracefully from Oregon--would you say something like that?

R.B.: I suspect so. Maybe the ham quality that I've developed and enjoyed--public presentations--could have originated in the Grange because we had farm organizations--you, the Grange--and I belonged to that since I was fourteen and until I went off to college.

I enjoyed making presentations, silly or serious, in public, quite easily...

C.S.: So there's a lot of the pastoral or country voice, is that you think?

R.B.: Well, I think that might be safe to say--I don't want to play with that too much (laughter)

C.S.: Ok. All right--I don't want to put you in a category here...

R.B.: Not bucolic, at least.

C.S.: But being a very urban person myself and enjoying being here in New Smyrna and also enjoying hearing you read your poems, with your delightful tone in them, It opens a whole new world for me.

R.B.: I like to--I have radical extremes there--I like the rural situation and I like a really downtown urban situation, too. I'm not much of a middle-grounder, I guess, in observations.

C.S.: Well, I think what I pick up in your work is about your experience in traveling, there's a lot in Tokyo, which is certainly an urban situation.

R.B.: I feed on travel, obviously I guess and that's a little bit odd in a time when people are looking for roots. It's almost become *de rigueur* to talk about seeking our roots, but coming from the Pacific North-West I've never really had that because I think maybe people went there to get away. Maybe they were running away from the law, maybe they were running away from debts, maybe they were running away from family situations they didn't like--they were interested in chopping roots and starting all over, which I suspect gives some validity to those folks who say maybe you can take Faulkner and Hemingway as two representative figures in America, where you have the strong-rootedness of Faulkner and you have the wander in Hemingway. Maybe, if we do generalize, that's a fairly decent one to make, as far as shooting an azimuth.

C.S.: Yes, and that could bring us to Williams, with his sense of place and having to be somewhere. I know that William Carlos Williams is one of the people who's had an influence on you, Is that true?

R.B.: Yes, that's true, and I think that William Carlos Williams' attention to the importance of each individual, of that Paterson business, of "one man like a city"--and I say, "one person like a city"--...And we have Charles Olson coming close on his heels in that great tradition, and that great tradition in Oldson is saying "polis is eyes," and giving an nice idea that each of us--in a way--is a mobile city, and what we see is worthy of commentary, and perhaps demands it sometimes. It's not the old classical theory, buy a long shot...

C.S.: How does Pound fit in there? Another person who, I know, has had a great influence on you.

R.B.: Yes. I think when I grew up, even though my High School had 40 people in the whole High School and my graduation class was 7, at least we got plenty of Shakspeare, and I loved him: and Edgar Allen Poe was ok, and we loved him. But after that, I think the first person I really fixated on was Eliot and subsequently Pound, and then Williams. And I think the fact that they were experimenting with the page was interesting. Their very personalities, as well as their work, continued to attract me.

C.S.: Yes, I know. I think we were in graduate school about the same time, and I know the tremendous influence Eliot had.

R.B.: William Carolas Williams did too, in a special way for me. He wrote the introduction to the second edition of my first little book. I wrote to Dr. Williams and asked him if I could use a letter he wrote in response to the hardback, as a preface to the second edition. Well, what happened was--as with many a beginning writer--I sent "fan club style" copies of my first little book to the ten writers I most respected. The only one who answered was Dr. Williams.

C.S.: That's very interesting...

R.B.: And when I found out that that was after he had suffered a second massive stroke,

and he took the trouble to write this lovely encouragement, it was doubly meaningful and, of course, still means a lot to me.

C.S.: He was a wonderful man that way.

R.B.: Yes, very generous.

C.S.: Well, now: how about the Orient? I know you spent a lot of time there. Could you say how that enters into your work?

R.B.: Yes...it's not logical. I remember, I thought for a long time, if I was really good and saved my money, maybe I could go there--to Hawaii--for a week vacation when I retired. But when I was sent there teaching with the University of Maryland, it opened up all sorts of things I hadn't dreamt of. And because of my friendship with James Laughlin (because of Ezra Pound and Dr. Williams) as publisher, I had entree to a literary scene in Tokyo that I wouldn't have otherwise had. And through Mr. Laughlin I met Yukio Mishima and his wife and ultimately we became good friends, and that enhanced my desire to learn more about--particularly--Japanese fiction. I'm still drawing off that, as well as off memories. New things and, I hope, good things, will continue to come out of the Oriental period.

C.S.: I feel the Oriental form in some of your shorter poems.

R.B.: The intensification, or the pinpointing of attention of the Oriental poetic form tends to heighten sensibility very often.

C.S.: Now, to change the subject completely since we're sitting in New Smyrna Beach, let me just throw out to you the question of what you think about workshops. We're both here and we're doing a workshop, so I thought you might just say something about that.

R.B.: There are workshops and there are workshops. Here I think we have a very nice mix of free time and work time and it allows people to follow their individual muse during the free time. If they want to get together it's great: criticize one-on-one the manuscripts--great. But, if they wish to be solitary and develop a story, as you've done these three wonderful stories in this two week period--that, too, is possible and then as long as we get together once a day for an hour or so, we get the cross-fertilization. I like it a lot. I've been to some workshops that I thought were a bit loose, and this is a happy medium.

C.S.: This does seem to have just a great mix.

R.B.: You think about it. Let me turn the gun on you, since you've been writing away, here.

C.S.: I've had such a wonderful experience, of being able to write these new, short stories in this time that I've been here. And to say "well, I'm going to write one for tomorrow" and actually go home and do it is good for me because I have essentially written poetry up until now. So I am delighted and pleased.

R.B.: As you know, my criterion, or suggestion, for the associates--is to try and work into a less familiar genre than the one we're used to, and I'm "Calvinist conscience-oriented"--terrible phrase--but I try to take my own medicine and I have gotten three chapters of novel that I've been waiting to start, finished! I felt that I couldn't look you in the eye if I didn't try my own medicine, and I wouldn't have had this opportunity, otherwise.

C.S.: So, k there's enough solitariness-

R.B.: --right...

C.S.: combined with a good deal of conviviality.

R.B.: I think there is an aura which invites that here, the selection of masters and associates that's gone on in the brief history of this particular place--The Atlantic Center has been so distinguished that we have some good vibes, as our students might say, back wherever we're teaching. I think that's important: conviviality. I found working with Ed Mayer, the sculptor and Terry Allen, that this cross-fertilization has been great. I don't know

how it's gone in the past, but it's like we've known each other a long, long time. The friendships have been super and, no doubt, when we get away we'll be drawing out of this for time indefinite.

C.S.: That's been really fine. So, then the latest thing that you're working on is a novel?

R.B.: Well, I've got several irons in the fire and at least two projected books of poetry. I've been using the same philosophy of Dr. Williams' that everybody's important, which I truly believe: I'm an egalitarian in that sense and perhaps always have been. But I've started learning again. I owe that to Pound. He said he'd been working out of Dante and he was still learning from Browning and I'm feeling that way right now about Plutarch. As I may have mentioned to you, I've tried to broaden the base of my learning, and all our learning is always so inadequate. And so, I reacquainted myself with Plutarch and I became so fascinated with some of the "minor" characters that I was rather carried away today. And it is the same with some of Chaucer's marvelous characters from the Canterbury Tales...and so I'm trying to try applications from the past and vivify them in current voice.

C.S.: So this is a new thing?

R.B.: It's quite recent.

C.S.: I liked those new poems, the other evening, very much.

R.B.: It's the first time I've had the courage to read them, but since you guys were daring to put your necks on the chopping block every morning, I...felt I could.

C.S.: And, so, those are personae poems.

R.B.: Yes, they are, indeed. I think, too, that the mixture of backgrounds and geographies that we have here, not just in our workshop, but in the others, has been very useful in opening up awareness that we, individually, may not have brought.

C.S.: I'm certainly feeling that. What about the poets, or fiction writers, as the case may be, that you admire and read now?

R.B.: My fiction reading is pretty much dedicated to the Japanese novelists. I try to keep abreast of a lot of novelists, but less in depth than I'm trying to do there: Mishima, Kawabata, Tanazaki, particularly, and Kenzaburo Oe, Kobe Abe. But in poetry, I'm particularly fond of the work of James Merrill, Carolyn Kizer, James Dickey, and Robert Creeley and it's hard to keep up. I remember Robert Duncan saying, a few years ago, that he thought more good poetry was being written now--per capital--that at any time in the history of the republic.

C.S.: I think that's true.

R.B.: So, it's wonderful. But it's a little overwhelming. When one tries to keep up, one realizes that that's a bit impossible. I think, that sometimes writers get a bad rap. Almost all the writers I know are not ego-trippers; they are very generous people, and I've had so much time given to me and I see other writers--young and old, published and unpublished--being helpful with each other, instead of doing the primadonna number...

C.S.: I agree with that.

R.B.: And I think that's something we need to get across to our friends who aren't in--as Carylson says--"the racket."

C.S.: I feel that way, too. I think that writers aren't the jealous, nasty, envious people that we're made out to be.

R.B.: There's just such a grand field to explore and, of course, playwriting, we haven't touched that, but Romulus Linney--who's been here at the center--is one of my very favorite playwrights, and I think his exciting use of history, both in playwriting and in the novel, is splendid. *The Jesus Tales*, as one of the books that we're looking at, is delightful and very thought provoking, too. Just one example of his unique abilities.

C.S.: Do you have any writing schedule? I know Bill Stafford had said that he sits down every morning, rain or shine, and thinks of and usually gets something. Do you have any particular way that you got about that?

R.B.: Not with poetry. However, since I'm trying to be more sustained in my writing of fiction, I've tried to adopt my friend Reynold Price's saying: "Rain or shine, good or bad." I'm writing 500 new works a day on a novel. I've found, happily enough, when I've applied that theory, which hasn't been of total consistency, that it's usually twice that amount. Once the thing begins to move I don't, of course, stop and count until the end of the segment seems to present itself. Then I count, and I found it's a good *modus operandi* for me. Poetry: well, I believe in the Muse. I find sometimes that even long poems seem to be gifts. I don't know that I would want to establish a particular format or formula for attacking the empty page of poetry. I know everybody has different mechanisms when they function best.

C.S.: What if the Muse does not come calling?

R.B.: If the Muse does not come calling, I call her! Carolyn Kizer has suggested that one of the best teaching devices--and I know you've worked with Carolyn, also--if you feel you've hit a dry well, get a grip--to someone who has translated from a literature you admire and --I don't know if I'm using the term correctly--but do a trans-literation, even though you may not know the language, using that translation as your basis. Try to--as Ezra Pound says--"make it new;" revivify and, in short, rewrite it but try to keep the spirit intact. And so I try to do that sometimes 'cause there are tons of non-English speaking writers I admire, even though I don't read their language I can read other translations. And I think that somewhere there's a middle ground that has worked with my efforts with Plutarch and the Chaucer. I haven't found that dry well, and I hope I don't come upon it for a long, long time, again--Knock on wood!

C.S.: Have you been reading some of the Latin-American poets?

R.B.: That's probably my greatest weak spot. I should think, right now. I still love Lorca, but I'm not up-to-date.

C.S.: Well, you have all that Japanese literature.

R.B.: There's one influence that preceded the Japanese, for me, the Icelandic. I served in the infantry in Iceland for a year and a half and I've been back three times. I hope to go back this summer if--if I have a little bit of luck. Iceland was the one place where I experienced what I thought was a "museaic gift"--if you will. It was on my third visit; I guess my second trip back after I came home from the military, and it turned out to be on the summer solstice and I was in the far north. Of course no darkness at all, and I'd been trying to write. I had written a few little poems that I was half-way happy with on the other two visits, but on summer solstice I just couldn't sleep with all the light and I went to my host's basement and there was this surge, and 24 poems--about 30 poems--emerged within two-half days...

C.S.: My goodness!

R.B.: About 24 of them passed muster, but it was as though I was the medium in that sense, and has been waiting, and I had had the urge, but just the collisions of the occasions and personalities, and the Muse were a gift.

C.S.: The Muse came calling.

R.B.: Yes! So, I look forward to more trips to Iceland. And right now--and this is appropriate to Florida, perhaps--I've finished in draft from a book of poetry called "The Gift and the Alligators," which is a line from a Charles Olson poem. But, one big section of that comes out of the Icelandic experience. While I do not know much about the Latin-American poets right now, I have spent half a dozen or more occasions in the Caribbean and--one third of the book is rather dedicated to, or draws out of the Caribbean experience...

C.S.: Yes, I did notice one of the poems in your latest book, which was quite delightful, took place in the Caribbean.

R.B.: Thank you. This new one takes a few risks: Shirlely McLaine may have upstaged me, darn it! But I--I have a few things in there that just to use Walter Lowenfel's term "slice light the way you want it," and it's not linear, but it's definitely moving.

C.S.: Since travel seems to be a great inspiration for you, does this conflict with your teaching? Do you get a lot of energy from teaching, or are you saying to yourself: "I want to go to Iceland!!"

R.B.: I get a lot of energy, but there are times when I feel that need for escape and to get away, so that there is the privacy that we've had (to quite an extent) here; to think and let the subconscious do its things, and to be there--ready--in case the gift of the poem or the story comes and you didn't see it before. You can't always do that when people are phoning or banging at your door...and coming to your office, as much as you enjoy the conviviality.

C.S.: You're obviously a wonderful teacher--"raconteur"--as I told you the other evening.

R.B.: I appreciate the compliment. I think that liking to teach is extremely important, and having situations where you feel that there is, indeed, cross-fertilization.

C.S.: Now, here's a weighty question: what advice would you give to young poets, or old poets like me--whichever, I don't care...

R.B.: I don't say I teach creative or imaginative writing, I sue the term "mid-wife." I'm a mid-wife or a mid-person, rather than a teacher.

C.S.: Yes.

R.B.: And magazines are constantly changing, so I think keep investigating: keep from being discouraged and associate with other writers, or appreciators of writing. I got the best advice, in a way, on my first book--my first hard-back, at least--I was floored and frustrated. I had all these cardboard boxes when I came back from Japan; I moved out from Oregon to the South-Easter I was sittin' in my living room, and a friend of mine, W.D. White, a very distinguished scholar, said: "don't just sit around until you become discouraged and forget making a book. Make four stacks of these manuscripts: the first stack, put the poems you absolutely couldn't imagine not being in your book, because they're that important to you. In the second stack put poems that have been published by editors. Obviously they had the respect to put them in their magazines. In the third stack, put poems that have been well received at public readings or by your friends in similar associations. The fourth stack is your discard: if it can't fit any of those, then go back through the stack, issue yourself the same question, and when you're done, you've got what amounts to the rough draft of a book." And it's terribly simplistic, in a way, but it was just the answer, and I would suggest that answer to poets of any age.

C.S.: I see.

R.B.: It also may help one from rushing into print.

C.S.: Yes, I was going to ask you how you felt about that part of it.

R.B.: I think it can be sad. I think acclaim in any field, if it comes very early and then disappears, it's probably much more wounding than having to wait and labor for a long, long time and then having a measure of recognition.

C.S.: Since we're talking about the subject of poetry and you read that wonderful poem that other evening, the Japanese translation--that seems to say so much about the source of poetry, I wonder if you'd read it.

R.B.: I can openly confess that I like it alot. It's a translation, so it was written by--originally--by a man named Kimigo Nishياما, and it violated that sacred rule. It writes a poem about writing poetry and it's called "Of Poetry," so we've broken all the rules.

C.S.: Right..

R.B.: It goes this way:

*I want to write a poem, secretly,
Which nonetheless no ne will fail to understand.
A cordial poem. After I'm dead
When somebody reads it
It will be like a heart reading a heart.
That's how I wish it.
Sorrow must be secret
But sometimes, sometimes the secret is beautiful
And sometimes the sorrow leaves the secret.
And the secret is still there
And beautiful, more than it was.
I wish to write a poem like that.*

C.S.: That's such a beautiful poem!!

R.B.: I'd like to meet Mr. Nishياما, someday.

C.S.: Well, thank you very much. It's been wonderful.

R.B.: It's been a lot of fun. A great place for it, too.

C.S.: And the sun came out.

R.B.: The sun, and just enough breeze.